

Sarielle

By: *Dan Madden*

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Something was wrong.

He could not place it, but the air in the cavern was different, as if the very stone itself was holding its breath, waiting for... something. Theyrian scanned the cavern walls again, yet still found nothing out of the ordinary. Grey stone formed a jagged pathway through a sea of rocky thorns that lay between two long rivers of crystal-clear waters. Diamonds within the rivers sparkled, illuminating the cavern in a soft blue light. The path led to an ancient altar, covered in a language long since lost to the Darthian elves. Atop that altar was the prize he and his fellow *visceria* had been sent for: the ancient sword his people called *Sarielle*.

The Fallen Star.

“Theyrian, what’re we waiting for?” Ellatha whispered beside him. Ellatha was a tall and agile elf, with skin dark as the caves she lived in, and hair whiter than snow. Her eyes were blinded at birth, the cost of her enhanced magical sight. She had risen the ranks quickly and was one of Theyrian’s first choices to accompany him on his quest.

She and the other three *visceria* that accompanied Theyrian were waiting in the tunnel, concealed in the shadows. They stood at the edge of the only visible entrance to and from the

ancient cavern, waiting for the final orders to enter. Those orders had yet to be given, for Theyrian felt a deep yearning in the cave. It was a strange magic, unknown to him. It was a feint aura of power and despair, calling for someone, anyone, to enter the chambers. The magic was not of this realm, and it frightened him.

“Something is wrong here,” Theyrian responded. He continued to search the caverns for the source of the power, but still found nothing out of the ordinary. “There is a magic unlike anything I’ve felt before, and I dare not enter the cavern blindly.”

“I sense the darkness surrounding the place, but we have little choice,” a third voice said. The voice belonged to Barthalos, the oldest active visceria. Of all the elves on the assignment, he possessed the greatest attunement to magic; it was no surprise he sensed the foul energy. “The city will be little more than ruin if we return without the sword, Theyrian. Risk verse reward matters little if there is no home for us to return to.”

Theyrian scowled to himself, turning back to the great caverns. Barthalos was right of course. The princess regent had begged him to complete this task and seek out the sword, the key to saving their city. Should the visceria fail, the consequences would be dire...

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Three Weeks Ago

The palace was a grand citadel of black glass and stone, built atop the ceiling of a grand cavern. Intricate webs of walkways connected the inverted towers that hung down over the Forgotten City. Portals were placed in many towers, providing the only means of transport from the palace to the city below.

Theyrian was on the edge of a balcony in the main tower, staring at the city. Purple and blue lights shown dancing below, casting their light off the smooth glass and obsidian walls

constructed about the city's perimeter. On normal days, he looked out with wonder, filled with pride for the resilience and beauty such civilization showed of his people.

Today he felt no joy, for grave tidings had come to pass in the palace. The queen had fallen ill, consumed by a literal shadow that seemed to dance around her physical form. No arcanists or healers had surmised what caused such darkness, nor could any find a way to break through the magical sickness. Compounding this tragedy was news of invaders. Demons from the realm of Emenyial had been identified in the southern passages, an entire army of villainous creatures slowly marching towards the capital. Refugees arrived in greater numbers, bringing similar horror stories of demon armies burning homes and slaughtering children and adults without prejudice.

The Princess Revielle had been announced as the regent until her mother recovered. She was still young by elven standards, but her wisdom and experience as a magic user were unparalleled. In court, she acted swiftly: her words were just and her actions tactical. The city and neighboring towns were in ruin, yet they were given hope in their princess.

Theyrian knew better. He had seen the tears in her eyes. He was there when she cried herself to sleep night after night, anxious and afraid. While she bore the face of a ruler in court, outside of it, she was a woman praying without hope for a miracle.

"Thank gods you're already here," Revielle said as she sat beside Theyrian. The princess was beautiful. She had light grey skin and silver eyes that flashed like steel. Her hair was jet black and always pulled back in a long braid she swung over her shoulder. She was dressed in the traditional robes of a queen: a black gown adorned with various layers of white and silver cloth embroidered with runes of old.

“I came as soon as I received the summons,” Theyrian said. “I would never leave you waiting.”

“Good, I would not have done well were I forced to wait,” Revielle forced a laugh. “All the happenings in the world feel too much to bear, and I have already been summoned for yet another court hearing within the hour. There is no rest.”

“The life of royalty is not an easy one, but you have done well thus far.”

“Yes well, I have done what I can,” she blushed. “Everything seems to be getting worse, however. I am not confident we can hold should the demons arrive while mother is still...sleeping.”

“Have faith in your warriors. Have faith in me.” Theyrian reached a hand over and took Revielle’s, interlocking fingers and squeezing tight.

“I trust you more than anyone in the kingdom. Which is why I must ask you to leave.”

“I do as you command,” Theyrian responded. The request was strange, but he would never disobey his princess.

“Well you might not after I tell you what you’re seeking.” Revielle cleared her throat then dove into the tale. “There is a legend, the story of our founding hero: Veildian. In it, he slays many beasts that awaited our people in the forgotten caverns, all before erecting the grand city we now reside in. During that time, there was told to be a sword, a magical sword crafted from a fallen star sent to us by Darthos himself.

“Rumor is the sword was not just a piece of myth, but a real weapon. The legend says the magic of the demons and otherworldly creatures it slew were entrapped in the blade, enhancing its powers. Whoever wields such a weapon would be granted immeasurable power, power that would rival even that of the first king himself.”

“I am familiar with the tale,” Theyrian said. “I remember my days as a child, running about pretending I wielded that very blade. Sarielle was its name.”

“Yes, that is it! But you see, I have reason to believe Sarielle is in fact real!”

“What has led to such conclusions m’lady?” Theyrian remained cool and calm outwardly, but inside, his heart was pounding. The excitement and intrigue surrounding such an artifact, such a legendary item, was hard to ignore.

“I have been reading many of the texts in the arcanum. I have found patterns in many of the ancient journals from the time of the rendering, and I believe I have a location. A general one at the very least.”

Revielle passed over a worn piece of parchment. The edges were ruined with many cracks and tears, yellowed from the years. Unfolding it cautiously, Theyrian found a map, one surrounded with tunnels unfamiliar to him. A bright star was drawn into one such cavern, the presumed location of Sarielle.

“I know not where these tunnels are, and I know not how to find them,” Revielle sighed. “But that blade is our last hope. You must try at the very least. I fear all other options won’t be enough now.”

Theyrian folded the paper and placed it in his vest. Then he leaned over and gave Revielle a kiss; she returned the gesture with equal passion.

“I will do all I can, my princess,” Theyrian said as he pulled away. “I promise I will bring back the blade.”

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Staring into the mysterious cave, the promise echoed in his thoughts. Despite his better judgement, Theyrian understood the dire need for the blade, one that was real and potentially lay within their grasp. To leave it now would be the greatest defeat his people had ever known.

“You are right Barthalos,” Theyrian whispered. “We have little choice but to claim the sword, regardless of the risk.”

Turning, he pointed to the rear guard: Vilne. “Watch the tunnel entrance. It is not glamorous work, but no one has better eyes nor a better shot of the bow than you. Should anything happen, I trust your judgement to prevent tragedy from returning to the Forgotten City. Barthalos and Ell: you’re with me.”

Theyrian turned and stepped into the cavern. He walked lightly; each step carefully placed along the marbled path that navigated through the forest of rocky thorns. The winding path was slightly below the altar and the yearning that weighed on Theyrian’s soul lessened as they moved forward.

Inside the cavern, the light was more brilliant than it appeared from the entry. It reflected through the cracks in the rocks, illuminating the world in a bizarre array of reflecting colors and shadows. Overhead, the ceiling was suddenly shrouded in darkness, though they had seen it clearly before entering. Everything about the cavern led the party towards the grand sword. The further they went, the more rocks they passed, as if they were lined up to watch silent vigil over the blade.

“Something is rather off, wouldn’t you say?” Barthalos whispered as they crept along the cavern floor. “I mean the stones almost seem to breathe in the light.”

“A simple trick of the eyes no doubt,” Ellatha shrugged, though her magical sight could not discern such things. Despite its power, it too had limits.

“Stay weary,” Theyrian warned. “I know you feel the weight in the air. We are not alone.”

Indeed, the three felt the air thicken about them as they inched closer to the sword. The yearning that had dissipated amplified around the blade itself, a call that seemed to pull the party closer, regardless of their intentions. Their hearts were echoing in their bodies, a throbbing that blocked all other sound in the chambers. The magical essence felt like eyes following them.

At the altar’s base, Ellatha stopped and grabbed Barthalos as well. Theyrian continued up the steps towards the altar but turned in confusion as the others ceased behind him.

“I have a feeling if we’re all up there, we’re going to do something horrible,” Ellatha said. Her voice wavered, as if she were in great pain deep in her heart. “That spell is working terrible magic on us. Theyrian, this was your quest. You claim the blade if you can, but we shan’t follow you further.”

“Madness!” Barthalos threw Ellatha’s hand aside. “Theyrian, I am the strongest magic user you brought. Let me claim the blade! I can feel the energy and its vision; I can wield it to bring new heights to the empire!”

“We need not such vision,” Theyrian spoke to Barthalos, his hand moving slowly towards his own sword. “We need it for salvation and freedom. Such thoughts of grandeur are dangerous, Barthalos. Stand down with Ellatha; she is wisest of all now.”

“Nonsense!” Barthalos drew his daggers. His eyes were aflame now, glowing a soft orange as if possessed by unforeseen forces. “The blade wishes to be used as in days of old! Let me wield it so-”

He was interrupted by the tips of daggers pointing through his chest. Ellatha had recovered from his first outburst and, without hesitation, drew her own weapons and ended the

corruption plaguing Barthatlos's thoughts. She withdrew her blades from the sorcerer's body as he collapsed, dead.

"It had to be done, Theyrian," Ellatha spoke through tears falling from her eyes. "It showed me visions as well. Strange and powerful visions. But I know better, and I know I cannot wield it. Neither could he. Even you may not be strong enough, but there are none I trust more to walk back down those steps alive. Besides, if the blade does corrupt your soul, you can trust me to kill you before you do anything stupid."

As she spoke, Bartahlos's body seemed to dissipate, changing to a mist of white that floated upwards before disappearing into the darkness above. Theyrian watched the spectacle and turned in silence towards the altar, strangely reassured by Ellatha's words. He released the hilt of his blades and finished his ascent.

The altar was much larger than he realized. Standing face to face with it, the monument rose to his chest, the black stone engraved with scenes of battle and runes of an ancient language. Warriors like elves were decorated on one side, the other side decorated with demonic creatures and skeletons. The altar's top was a solid black marble, angled away from Theyrian so the back side rose above the rest. Laying on the altar was the blade, the mythical Sarielle.

Sarielle was more beautiful than Theyrian had ever imagined. The hilt was a bright white steel, bound in black leather that appeared fresh and new as the day it was first crafted. There were no etchings or runes engraved in the fine steel. It bent outwards at the guard where it met the actual blade: a black metal that reflected the world around like a black mirror. In its shine, Theyrian saw his own reflection, but saw well beyond that. Within, he saw fires, lights, cities, souls, triumph, and defeat; countless episodes of the blade's history swirled about it in magical fury.

All the energy called out to him, begging him to place his hand on the hilt and claim it for his own. For over a thousand years it had sat unused, its fury burning bright to unimaginable levels. It yearned for combat; it yearned for the bloodlust in its users; it yearned for magical force to feed its hunger.

Theyrian reached a hand and placed it around the leather hilt. Immediately, the ground around the cavern shook and the light was replaced with an eerie fog of purple. The jagged stones along the cavern's floor began to fade away, replaced with replicas of fog. Ellatha watched this and, daggers still drawn, rushed up the altar. Better to face the unknown by Theyrian's side than alone on the cavern floor.

On the altar itself, Theyrian's eyes had gone black. One hand still clenched the sword, his physical body frozen in that moment. Ellatha called out to Theyrian, but no answer was forthcoming. She called to him again, nudging him with her hands, but his body remained rigid and unresponsive.

Below, the mist where the stones once lay dissipated, revealing countless warriors. Some were clad in ancient armor and weapons; some wore travelers gear and sorcerers' robes; some Ellatha recognized as guards of the Forgotten City, presumed dead or lost in the endless maze of tunnels. All these warriors and adventurers had found the blade, knowingly or not, only to fall victim to the test that lay before them.

The first one began to creep up towards the altar, armed and ready to kill.

"Perfect," Ellatha growled, taking her place atop the altar's steps. Beyond, she saw the endless army of guardians, rising and walking towards her.

She struck down the first undead, ready to make her final stand in cavern halls long forgotten.

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Theyrian was weightless, floating in a cloud of purple mist that enveloped him. His body disappeared, but slowly regained its form, despite the lack of feeling in his limbs. The heavy mist receded, revealing an endless blackness, and a lone figure standing before Theyrian.

The figure was an elf. The stranger wore a robe made of black chain draped over his body. Solid pieces of silver plate were strapped over his shoulders and kness; a single brooch marked with a purple 'x' held up a long black cloak that shrouded the figure. His head was pale skinned, the eyes empty sockets. Black hair was tied back in a long tail behind him. Despite the disfiguration, the figure appeared regal and imposing of stature.

“Welcome, my child,” a voice echoed around the emptiness. It took a moment for Theyrian to realize the voice belonged to this figure, though his lips never moved.

“Who are you? Where am I?” Theyrian asked.

“I am surprised you fail to recognize me, for it is my blood that flows through your veins now.” The strange elf glided forward, the mist about the ground parting as he passed through.

“You are one my descendants, though the world has forgotten who we truly are.”

“Riddles and vague sentences do little for me,” Theyrian said. “I am afraid I know not where I am, but I know it is not a place of natural laws.”

“Natural laws are rather flimsy things,” the voice said amused. “You should use wiser words child. Then again, the Forgotten City has truly lived up to the name, for the memories and blessings of old have all but left you.”

Theyrian said nothing, looking over the figure. He sensed greatness, an aura that was inspiring and terrifying at the same time. There was a darkness that followed this man, despite the calm demeanor in which the figure moved.

“Yes, you sense it correctly. I am a ghost of my former self, consumed by powers I was too foolish to control,” the figure said as it moved closer. “And yet, you have come to claim such powers, though you know not what you truly seek. None of you ever do, though you may prove more worth than most. In the end however, the fate for all is the same.”

“You are Veildian,” Theyrian exclaimed.

“Indeed, I am a name that has been lost in history, save to survive in a legend and myth among the very people my life was lost to save.” There was a bitterness in those words, a hatred that burned deep in the man’s soul. “But worst of all, you have all been fools, for you have forgotten the terror of Sarielle. It is worst than I, and it nearly destroyed all we worked to build. To wield such power is an insurmountable task, one no mortal shall ever achieve again.”

“Veildian, we know of the terror the sword rot. IT possessed the demons and their souls, and that magic nearly ripped you apart,” Theyrian stood defiant and confident. “But it is now our only salvation, for threats beyond our very realm rock the gates of all you achieved. It is time for the sword to rise into the world again!”

“Fools!” The voice laughed. “The sword does more than ensnare the souls of demons. It seeks out the souls of all who wield magic, an endless hunger that is never satiated. You come in search of salvation, only to find apocalypse!

“The sword was made from a fallen star, a blessing sent to us from Darthos. But we did not realize the will of gods can be so easily corrupted, a flaw that led to dire consequences in the mortal world. See, we are merely interpreters of our gods wishes, and we failed in interpreting the power of the stone. In doing so, we created a grand piece of art, a sword that pales to all but one such blade, a sister in another kingdom. Regardless, we failed in crafting our art, for we

created a hunger beyond our own recognition. It is that same hunger that ate away at most of the bloodline, the kingdom, and eventually, my very soul.”

Theyrian could hear the pain in the voice, as well as see the deep lines that furrowed their way through Veildian’s face. Yet desperation drove him to find the blade, and he would not leave without it.

“I am sorry to hear of such history,” Theyrian began. “But I am not come to bargain with you. The blade is needed, and I must return to bring it back and save our people. Only that mission matters, for it is my purpose in coming. I will not fail such a quest now, not at the hands of a spirit long since passed this world.”

“I will not hinder you child,” the voice responded. “I only wish to warn you. The blade will hunger and lust for your soul. Only purpose and strength will allow you to resist. Find what you love, what makes the mortal world worth fighting for, and never let it go. I lost my fight with the blade as soon as love left my heart. It may be trivial, but passion outweighs passions. Yours must be greater than Sarielle’s!”

“I think I understand,” Theyrian nodded.

“Good. Then it is time you pass into the world of mortals once more. Though I’d travel with haste. You will find an army of guardians, all the past victims of the blades, awaiting you. Should you fail their test, then you are doomed to join them.”

Before Veildian could elaborate, the mist enveloped his figure; he vanished. Then, the mist wrapped its way about Theyrian, until it consumed him entirely.

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Theyrian's eyes returned to their natural color as his conscience was returned to the natural world. His hand still gripped the leather blade, and he watched a black magic begin to crawl up his arm. Behind him, the sound of flashing blades and falling bodies pulled his attention.

He turned about and hefted Sarielle high, readying for combat. There were no enemies nearby however, for Ellatha had busied herself in his absence. Atop the altar steps, mounds of undead bodies had been slain and thrown asunder, victims of the duel daggers whistling through the air. But she was not unscathed, for the undead forces were seemingly unending, and many landed blows that punctured her armor. Red blood was beginning to drip about her arms and legs, though she protected her core.

"About gods damn time!" Ellatha sighed as she skewered another soldier, sending the body back into a group of others below the altar.

"I met Veildian," Theyrian exclaimed, taking the blade to stand beside his comrade and join the fray.

"Fucking tell me all about it, but after we get through this little mess."

Together the two moved into familiar combat, watching each other's flanks as they hacked their way down the altar steps. However, Theyrian watched the strange mist about his arm grow darker as they fought onwards, expanding up his arm towards his heart. The magical energy that had filled the cavern seemed to be gathering around him, slowly gaining weight as it pressed against his body and soul. Each step was met with greater difficulty, as if invisible hands clung to his legs, pulling against his efforts.

He collapsed and fell to his knees, though his hands never lost grip of the blade. It felt hot now, as if each strike were fueling some unseen flame. The black glass of the blade was

unstained, though much blood and guts had been spilled upon it. Theyrian became transfixed, his vision beginning to blur as dark clouds crept inwards from the peripherals of his sight.

“Come on!” Ellatha grabbed Theyrian. “Vilne left us an opening!”

Theyrian did not budge. No pulling or struggles got him to move; Sarielle captivated his very essence, the hunger moving towards his own soul. It urged him to look upon Ellatha, not as an ally, but a tool. In it, the blade saw fresh magic, unlike the rotting enemies that surrounded them. Theyrian could gain new powers by striking down the woman and claiming her magic as his own.

The power and temptation swam through Theyrian’s head, though he fought hard against the evil wills. Wishes were refused, but the darkness persisted. Ambitions of another entity clouded Theyrian’s vision as the dark clouds grew stronger, until the entire world became black.

Ellatha cursed and left him then, rushing through the gap in the enemy lines Vilne made. She turned once as the sea of undead seemed to swallow Theyrian up, blade and all. In the swath of walking dead, he continued his battle against the mental strain of Sarielle as the blade begged him to yield. Physically, pain began to strike through his veins as the undead weapons began to hack at his armor, piercing skin beneath.

As the world seemed to fade away, as Theyrian felt he had failed, a light shone in the depths of his mind. It was a single face, a kind and beautiful face, calling for him. The voice was soft and pure, and it rang true to his soul. It was Revielle’s voice, sweet and pure, as she was in all the days before her mother’s illness. It was the soft touch of her hands against his skin, the memory of her lips, that gently pulled him out of the sword’s grasp.

Pulling away, more faces shown in his head: Ellatha, Vilne, and all the other viscera he led. They called to him now, their need and trust in him strong as ever. Compared to such duty,

the blade in his hands felt light, almost nonexistent. Revielle stretched a hand forward, and Theyrian gladly took it.

In an instant, the clouds were washed away. Clarity and purpose replaced the once villainous hunger that racked at Theyrian's mind. His body was his own, and it was in pain; but the blades about stopped biting as the undead stepped away from the dark elf. They watched him rise with fear in what little remained of their mortal selves, staring at the reincarnation of a hero long since forgotten.

Theyrian rose with the blood of his ancestor, Veildian the first king, rushing unhindered through his veins. The sword of black had turned to silver, with a purple glow emitting from the edges. That glow surrounded Theyrian, healing his wounds and renewing his physical prowess. He raised the blade with both hands and saw beyond the crowds his own visceria, suddenly in awe of his power.

With one final breath, Theyrian struck onwards, cutting his way through the guardians as a wolf through a heard of sheep. They fell or retreated from his might, until Theyrian stood with his back to the ancient cavern, in front of the Vilne and Ellatha. They bowed before their captain, inspired, and terrified by the display of the sword's might.

"Come now, do not bow," Theyrian said. "I am no king, nor do I have intentions of such titles."

"Say what you will, but that sword is incredible," Ellatha spoke, her head down as she remained on her knee. "King or not, I know what I've seen. This is stuff of legend, Theyrian. And by the gods, I will follow that legend until the end."

“The end may be closer than you think,” Theyrian sighed. “The blade’s hunger still lurks in the blackness. Though it is tamed now, I know it will come hunting again. For now, we have our mission, and that is to save the city. That should be enough.”

Ellatha sheathed her weapons and rose as well, though her eyes never left Theyrian and Sarielle.

“I’m worried about that blade,” Ellatha said. “Something seems...off.”

“It was never meant to be turned into weapons,” Theyrian said. He clasped the blade behind him in a makeshift sheath Revielle had enchanted to fit any weapon. Though it was now wrapped in the enchanted cloth that hung over Theyrian’s back, he could still feel the blade’s voice calling for him, begging to be used again. It was a voice that hovered in the back of his mind, where it was carefully locked away.

“Alright, let’s move back to the city,” Theyrian commanded. “We’ve only just begun this journey.”

The others nodded, then leaped off into the tunnels. Theyrian moved to follow but paused for a moment as he looked over the cavern. The altar stood bare, yet in its reflection he could just make out his own eyes, glowing despite their distance.

Theyrian turned away, though he would never escape the grim fate that awaited his return.